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Leading School Turnaround and Improvement in Malaysia and Indonesia

Alma Harris, Michelle Jones

University of Bath, UK

Donnie Adams, Bambang Sumintono

University of Malaya, Malaysia

Nashwa Ismail

University of Bath, UK



The
HEAD
Foundation

Leading School Turnaround and Improvement in Malaysia and Indonesia¹

Alma Harris, Michelle Jones (University of Bath, UK)

Donnie Adams, Bambang Sumintono (University of Malaya, Malaysia)

Nashwa Ismail (University of Bath, UK)

Introduction

Improving the fortunes of low-performing schools, often in the most challenging circumstances, remains a persistent and pervasive challenge in many education systems (Meyers & Darwin, 2017). This working paper outlines the findings from a small, qualitative comparative research project funded by the Head Foundation. The working paper commences with some explanation and contextualization of the idea of ‘turnaround schools’ from the literature. It presents the research methodology and subsequently outlines the main findings from the research project.

While ‘no single definition of school turnaround exists’ (Hochbein & Mahone, 2017:15) it is generally accepted that the term refers to schools that have significantly improved their performance from a low threshold. Looking at the available research literature on this subject, it is evident that terms such as, ‘takeover’, ‘turnover’, ‘restructuring’, ‘reconstitution’, and ‘redesign’, are used interchangeably to define how low-performing schools are improved and transformed.

Scanning the international research literature concerning ‘turnaround schools’ highlights that most of empirical evidence tends to reflect Western perspectives. There is a substantial corpus of research that has focused on improving low-performing schools in the United States (Murphy, 2008, 2008a, Meyers & Murphy, 2008; Murphy, 2009; Meyers & Darwin, 2017; Stringfield, Schaffer, & Reynolds, 2017). These findings reinforce the importance of school leadership in creating the conditions for lasting improvement and change. There is also a growing body of

¹ A version of this working paper is currently under consideration for publication in Myers, C. et al (eds) (2018) *International Perspectives on Leading Low-Performing Schools* Infoagepub.com USA

evidence underscoring the important role that districts, in the USA, play in improving failing schools (Duke, 2012; Player, Hitt, & Robinson, 2014).

In the UK, there is also a substantial literature focusing mainly on improving schools in challenging contexts and exploring how low-performing schools reverse their fortunes (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). The international literature on school turnaround reveals that there are some consistent strategies across contexts and settings that have been successful and impactful. These include school improvement planning (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002), the provision of expert assistance (Duke, 2012; McColskey & Monrad, 2004; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005), the implementation of comprehensive reform models (Brady, 2003) and the use of reconstitution and related takeover strategies, such as privatization (Kowal & Hassel, 2011; Phenix, Siegel, Zaltsman, & Fruchter, 2005).

Countless empirical studies over successive decades have linked effective leadership practice to improved student achievement outcomes, particularly for schools in difficulty (Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins 2008). In broad terms, turnaround leadership includes a set of leadership approaches aimed at addressing poor student achievement, which includes developing strategies to improve achievement, and the monitoring of the impact of these strategies over time (Fullan, 2006; Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010; Meyers & Murphy, 2008; Meyers & Darwin, 2017). Other analyses indicate that effective turnaround leadership involves a combination of instructional, transformational, and managerial leadership behaviors (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Urick & Bowers, 2014).

As established earlier, most of the turnaround literature is situated within Western educational settings, particularly North America and the United Kingdom. In contrast, the literature on school improvement and turnaround schools within Asia is developing (e.g Cheng & Tam, 2007; Dimmock, 2003; Harris, 2015; Chapman, 2016). Consequently, this small-scale, exploratory study of leading school turnaround in Malaysia and Indonesia was undertaken in order to contribute to the existing knowledge base. The study focused on the process of turnaround from the

perspective of principals and teachers in each context². The next section of this working paper provides some background on the education systems in both countries.

Malaysia and Indonesia

In terms of performance, Malaysia scores significantly lower in international assessments like TIMSS and PISA, when compared to its high performing Asian counterparts like Singapore or Hong Kong (Ministry of Education, 2013; Pemandu, 2010). Only Indonesia performs less well than Malaysia in these international assessments (Mayberry, 2015). General concerns about school performance in Malaysia, based on various international assessments, resulted in a Malaysian Educational Blueprint³ (2013-2025) for improvement. The MEB maps out eleven major shifts required for significant improvement which includes a concerted effort to turnaround failing or struggling schools.⁴

To understand low performance in Malaysia requires an appreciation of the school banding system. In Malaysia, public schools are divided into 7 performance Bands, from Band 1 (the highest performance) to Band 7 (the lowest performance) (Ayob, 2012; Mayberry, 2015). School leaders of Band 6 and 7 schools, are given special assistance from the Ministry of Education (MOE), and have been provided with a '*School Improvement Toolkit*' (SIT), to help them identify areas for improvement in their schools.

There is also another category of public schools in Malaysia that have been associated with a significant turnaround in their outcomes. These schools are referred to as '*Lonjakan Saujana*' (Momentum Leap) schools because they have demonstrated a significant improvement in their achievement from low performance to a high performance (Pipit, 2010). In addition, Trust Schools, introduced in 2010, were aimed at reversing the fortunes of under-performing public schools. This private -public partnership model (based on Charter Schools in the US and Academies in England) is now the government's major school improvement initiative (Harris & Jones, 2017). The Trust Schools programme in Malaysia is aimed at creating a school

² Appendix A provides background information on the education systems in Malaysia and Indonesia.

³ <http://www.moe.gov.my/index.php/en/dasar/pelan-pembangunan-pendidikan-malaysia-2013-2025>

⁴ The Government Transformation Programme (GTP 1.0) has provided a reform model, alongside the School Improvement Programme (SIP), which falls under the remit of the District Transformation Programme (DTP).

transformation model, as a long-term strategic vision, to produce better student outcomes and improved school performance over the long term (Hamilton, 2014).

Turning next to Indonesia, the biggest country in the South-East Asia region in terms of size, strategic location, and natural resources. Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country (over 250 million people) spread across seventeen thousand islands with over 300 different languages. More than 50 million students are enrolled in this gigantic education system which makes it a much more complex, diverse, and diffuse education system than Malaysia.

Within the Indonesian education systems, there are six years of primary school, three years of junior secondary school, three years of senior secondary school and four years of college education. There is also secular schooling, Islamic schooling, and out-of-school education. Compulsory education in Indonesia lasts for a total of nine years. This includes six years of primary school education, known as Sekolah Dasar, which begins when a child is six or seven, followed by three years of secondary school education, Sekolah Menengah Pertama, which begins at the age of 12 or 13. Within Indonesia, there is a vibrant and growing private, international school sector, which largely caters for expatriates.

The Indonesian government has established criteria for good schools (called sekolah unggulan) which include a heavy weighting on student achievements in public examinations. In addition, the government identifies the best schools in an area (big cities and towns) and allocates extra funding to support these schools in their improvement efforts. These schools are called international standard schools and they consist largely of public schools. (Sumintono, Subekti, Mislani, Said, & Tahir, 2014). Unlike Malaysia, however, there have been no government led initiatives to actively support the turnaround of low or underperforming schools.

Within Indonesia, most support and resources tend to be allocated to schools in cities where the government aims to preserve elite educational institutions (Nielsen, 2003; Beeby, 1979). In this context, the term 'turnaround' is generally not widely understood. Plus, the type of centrally driven school improvement initiatives that feature heavily in Malaysia as part of the wide-ranging reform process are simply not

part of the Indonesian educational landscape. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, the causes of low-performing schools can be traced to an imbalanced distribution of education resources (e.g. OECD, 2015).

Malaysia and Indonesia are both developing countries and as such, there are significant inequities and large disparities in wealth (Harris & Jones, 2017) that impact upon the educational access and provision. Many children in Malaysia and Indonesia live in remote, rural areas where educational resources are very limited, and schooling is variable in quality. In Indonesia around half of the population lives on the national poverty line (\$16 per month) and 28 million live below it⁵. A high birth rate alongside a shortage of schools and qualified teachers in Indonesia has resulted in a significant challenge for the Indonesian education system, where law requires teachers, to acquire a 4-year college degree.

In poor, rural areas in Indonesia, primary school enrollment rates are below 60%; the more affluent areas of this country however, have achieved universal primary education. Insufficient and differential educational investment in schools in Indonesia and Malaysia has been cited as one of the main causes of low-performing or under-performing schools. In addition, the significant differences between urban and rural prosperity is another underlying cause of low school performance in both countries.

While various studies claim that there are no uniform factors that can account for poor performance among under-performing schools (Bernardi, 2014; Hao, Hu, & Lo, 2014), it is clear that there are certain contextual factors, such as underinvestment, poverty and disadvantage that can actively prevent such schools from improving (Harris & Jones, 2017). These factors are also present in low-performing schools in Western contexts and countries (Hayes, Fulcher, Hogg, Ramsey, & Proscia, 2017) and they continue to represent considerable barriers to lasting educational change and improvement. The next section of this working paper outlines the research methodology and process.

⁵ <http://educateachild.org/our-partners-projects/country/indonesia>

Methodology

The research adopted a case-study approach comprising 10 low-performing schools in both Malaysia and Indonesia that respectively that have secured significant improvement (Yin, 2013; Strauss, 1987 & Corbin, 1998). While the limitations of case studies in providing any causal explanations are fully acknowledged (Hochbein & Mahone, 2017) the study focused on illuminating some of the features or characteristics of school turnaround in these two contexts. The findings therefore are indicative rather than definitive.

The sampling frame for selecting the schools used multiple criteria that included: socio-economic status, academic performance (raw and gain scores) peer recognition, value added data (if available), reputation and standing, community involvement and engagement. Initially, fourteen schools were selected in Indonesia and twelve were selected in Malaysia. This oversampling allowed the team to check that the schools met the criteria as a turnaround school and as a contingency, if any schools declined to participate.

The final Malaysian sample included six primary schools and four secondary schools from five States (Johor, Selangor, Terengganu, Penang, and Sarawak). This sample included six rural schools and four urban schools. In terms of academic performance, the selected schools had demonstrated an improvement in their banding, so for example from band 5 to band 3. In addition, the selected schools demonstrated improvements in UPSR and SPM percentage passes over a six-year period.

In the case of Indonesia, the final sample of nine schools (one withdrew from the study) included four primary schools, three junior schools and two secondary schools. Three schools were in Yogyakarta, three in Makassar, South Sulawesi and three in Surabaya, East Java. The primary schools were selected based on national Mathematics and Science tests and the junior schools and secondary schools were selected based on improvement in national banding. Six schools were located in urban areas and three were in suburban areas.

As noted earlier, the literature about improving low-performing schools in Malaysia and Indonesia is developing, few studies have been undertaken in these contexts. The literature that exists, however, was collated, as background evidence and used by the

research team as a basis for constant comparison (e.g. Damanik & Aldridge, 2017; Ling, Pihie, Asimirin, & Fooi, 2015). In addition, detailed analysis of documentary and background evidence from each of the selected schools in Malaysia and Indonesia, where available, was compiled. Each of the selected schools, in each country, was visited by two or three researchers to ensure inter-researcher reliability. In all selected schools, the principal was interviewed. The principal interviews were semi-structured, used a standard protocol, and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. In addition, at each school, data were collected from focus groups of 4-6 teachers for the purpose of data triangulation. A semi-structured approach was used along with open-ended questions to elicit information about the school and the principal's role and actions in the turnaround process. All participants completed a consent form and were offered the opportunity to check their transcripts and to correct any errors. All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed.

For each school, documentation related to the process of turnaround, where it was available, was collected. For example, performance data, improvement plans, district or municipal policies and details of any external support or intervention. These documents were used to verify and check interpretations of the process of turnaround based on the interview and focus group data. Finally, photographs were taken at each school and used as visual cues and points of reference in the analytical process. A constant comparative approach and systematic data interrogation was adopted by the whole team (Yin, 2013).

The transcripts were transferred into ATLAS.ti 8 (Muhre & Friese, 2004), which is a software package commonly used to analyse qualitative data. The analysis of the qualitative data rested upon the techniques of coding and constant comparison advocated by Strauss (1987).

The qualitative analysis from this project was completed in six steps:

1. Transcripts of the recorded interviews and focus groups were read to become familiar with the data sets;
2. A coding framework was developed based upon the prior assumptions contained in the international literature and reflected in the interview schedules. This was supplemented by additional codes that came from initial reading, sharing and interrogation of part of the data set;

3. This framework was tested against various transcripts, by all team members, and adjusted for fit, appropriateness and strength
4. The coding families feature was used to move to more abstract levels of analysis, and ultimately to identify cross-cutting themes;
5. The strength of these themes was checked by using ATLAS.ti 8 and the inter-relationships between themes was also mapped and illuminated;
6. Indicative, and representative quotations for each theme were selected, from the principal interviews and the focus groups and the ATLAS.ti bundles were revisited to ensure that the themes and the quotations were clearly validated and representative of all the available data.

Cross-case analysis (Khan & Van Wynaesberghe, 2008) was used to draw comparisons of the commonalities and differences between the cases within this study. Cross-case analysis affords the opportunity to mobilize and refine the data across different cases. The next section of this working paper considers the findings from the research in two sections 1) Leadership and 2) Improvement Foci.

Leadership

a) Leadership Challenges

From the principals' data (P 1-19⁶) and the teachers in focus groups (T1 -T19) it was clear that most schools, in the study, faced considerable challenges as a direct result of high social deprivation. The comments from principals and teachers reveal the nature and extent of such challenges.

“75% of the students are from low income families. And they are struggling. If we have any promotional events or projects, we cannot collect money from the students. They, the students, themselves need to be given money.” (P8)

⁶ Principals interviews (P1-19)

“The school is in a poor area that has experienced high levels of vandalism. For example, most of the classes are without doors, the windows are without glass and the toilets are all destroyed.” (T6)

“All the light switches were all dug out, pulled out, most of them, especially the ground floor and some hidden corners, chairs and tables were broken.” (P3)

Over a third of the schools in this study had buildings that had been in very poor repair with damaged classrooms. The level of disrepair in these schools meant that principals faced an uphill struggle in firstly, securing the resources they needed to improve the physical environment of the school and secondly, encouraging students to come to a school environment that was unwelcoming. The extent of this challenge was further exacerbated by the fact that, in many cases, parents did not engage with the school or take an active part in supporting their child’s education. As two principals reflected:

“Some parents do not send their kids to school, when they are asked about the reason, and they reply that the child did not have enough sleep, or the student says that my mother or my father was still asleep. So, I have no family support in terms of students’ support for learning at home.” (P5)

“Parents here are not educated and their attitude is they want to see how the school can help them, they don’t want to contribute to the school. Parents do not think that their child wants to succeed. I always tell parents at the AGM (Annual General Meeting), if your child wants to succeed we need a relationship between school and parents.” (P6)

This lack of parental support or engagement was also raised by teachers in schools in both contexts. They highlighted the difficulties of simply getting parents to have an interest in their child’s education.

“Very little parental guidance and support are given to students. We do not think much guidance is given as parents are working. This school has given parents a lot of help, but parents’ awareness remains a challenge.” (T11)

Research evidence consistently underlines the importance of parental engagement in the improvement of student learning, particularly in the most challenging contexts (Goodall, 2017). Yet, in most of the schools in this study both principals and teachers saw the engagement of parents as a particularly difficult problem and challenge to address.

b) Leadership Responses

In terms of addressing such challenges, the principals in this study demonstrated a deep commitment to their students and staff. Their responses demonstrated that they were all determined to the very best they could for the children and the community they served. The situations that they faced were, in many cases, extremely difficult yet all the principals focused on finding practical solutions to help resolve or minimize the negative impact of poverty and disadvantage.

“I think you need to go to the grass root level to find out the real issues, to mingle with the kids. During recess time, I would walk to them, I would say, "why are you not eating?" I found out that children are not eating because they don't have money. So, I planned to get free breakfast for them.” (P3)

“From the beginning, the principal informed us that providing extra-curricular activities would bring tangible results and would engage the parents more. Therefore, it happened that parents volunteered to take on board the extra-curricular events.” (P8)

“After four months the principal refurbished the school canteen and Muslim Prayer room. The physical changes surprised the community. This made parents and teachers trust her and love her” (T9)

“We had an extension of the Canteen. We have 1157 students and the canteen was small, so we needed to extend it. An extension was put on to the roof so that students have a more comfort during their break time. Apart from that, we had funding for a new library. The new library, is now downstairs instead of upstairs, so that students can go to it easily.” (T4)

The data showed that the principals in this study pushed children to be prouder of themselves and to value their school. The principals’ main aim was to secure better outcomes through a change in mindsets and beliefs about what was possible and achievable.

“I know that the teachers are very hard-working but I push them to really raise their expectations of the children. They now have new priorities and time frames.” (P9)

“I try to change the mind-set, to encourage the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) chairman, the School Board of Directors to put some effort and money into the school.” (P1)

“We should always think out of the box, we should always think far ahead, not sticking to the same routine. I try my best to push students and staff to raise expectations. Our goal is UPSR achievement and the most important thing is I want for my children is to be able to read and write.” (P11)

The principals also reported incidences of being persistent and tenacious to get much needed resources, funding or help for their school. This required balancing internal and external priorities.

“I was losing student numbers. So, to increase the number of students in the school, I worked with my chairman and we tried our best show-case our school, in different places, like a supermarket opening ceremony. Promoting the school, this way increased or enrollment to 368.” (P1)

“I tried to find funding for a proper place to have a school gathering. I also sent paperwork to replace the school gates. I've sent a lot of paperwork to the District and have been persistent.” (P12)

The evidence points to the centrality of the leader in initiating and securing organizational improvement. The importance of school leadership is substantiated by the international literature (Leithwood *et al.*, 2010) and further exemplified by the leadership practices adopted by the principals in this study.

c) Leadership Practices

Previous research on school turnaround has found that effective leaders are intentional and strategic in setting schoolwide goals that can inspire a common vision among teachers, students, and the wider community (Villavicencio, 2017). Such leaders secure school turnaround by selecting, implementing, and coordinating sets of strategies. (Leithwood *et al.*, 2010). The evidence from this study showed that principals and teachers tended not to talk explicitly about ‘school turnaround or improvement strategies’ but focused their efforts on certain areas or foci for improvement.

While improving test scores remain a clear expectation placed upon the shoulders of school leaders in both contexts, the principals in this project were driven by a broader desire to give young people, in some of the poorest communities, a chance of success. Their comments and reflections showed that they shared a desire to build community, in the broadest sense, by bringing children, families, and the stakeholders together. Recent research evidence shows that creating, nurturing, and sustaining a positive school community is a powerful means of securing and sustaining improvement (Harris, Jones & Huffman, 2017).

The evidence from the interviews showed that in terms of the process of turnaround, the school leaders in this study demonstrated five inter-related leadership practices.



The enactment of these practices differed depending on the immediate need or prevailing issues they principals were facing but in all cases, these leadership practices were demonstrated and exemplified.

i)Expectations-Setting Goals and Directions. The literature on school turnaround clearly underlines the importance of the principal setting a new direction or pathway as strong signal that change is about to happen (Leithwood *et al.*, 2010). In this study, the principals were seen, and indeed described, in terms of establishing a new vision for the school. Essentially, their leadership was characterized as creating a point of departure from previous practice and performance. There was also a sense that some principals wanted to re-brand or re-position the school not only to provide a new start but also to strengthen its chance of improving.

“We are not top school in the city, we cannot compete because our students’ intake is not as good as the top school. We decided to base our teaching on art and cultural values, such as co-curriculum activities (i.e. traditional music), school environment is designed with art and culture approach. We got help and guidance from an art professor in a local university where we design together a program for the whole

school based on art and cultural values. We set new goals and expectations for the school.” (P14)

“The principal has the clear vision to get help from outsiders. We know that the internal fund that we have is limited. So, we have managed to make sure that changes to the Tamil classroom were achieved with help from parents. Also, the principal has secured links with Giant Taman Kinrara's CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and we now have a ‘Giant love My School’ program.” (T5)

“What I found in this principal is that she has a clear vision. She is clear that our core purpose is academic development, so teachers take the GUSTO training. These are many principals’ initiatives for teacher development and improvement. Also, we have already begun to expand ICT facilities, trying to find helpful suppliers. In terms of security as well, our principal is patrolling, she looks at whether the worker is in danger, the damage to the school, she is fixing it all. So, the principal has a very strong vision for our future.” (T2)

Teachers also noted the tone of change and the introduction of new, higher expectations. Some teachers felt that the principal was deliberately trying to breathe new life into the school by setting a very different direction and introducing a broader set of learning opportunities for children.

“The principal’s goal is no longer just on academic results. She is trying to bring back much more of a balance. The other two headmasters only wanted to focus on academic performance, but the new principal is also looking at extra-curricular activities for the children and is less focused on just academic outcomes.” (T5).

“We support extra-curricular activities now, this did not happen before. The school’s image has changed dramatically.” (T7)

The principals in this study shared a strong conviction that changing priorities would not detract from academic performance but conversely would improve performance, which in most cases, it did. The evidence from this study suggests that the introduction of extra-curricular activities led to improved students’ attendance and greater engagement with classroom learning.

ii) *Managing Different Priorities*. The issue of competing priorities in turnaround schools is widely acknowledged in the research literature (Leithwood *et al.*, 2010). The evidence from this study suggests that the principals faced a wide range of

competing priorities and in most cases, had to balance conflicting agendas. On the one hand there was pressure by the Ministry, District, or Municipality to raise standards and to improve attainment but on the other, as noted earlier, many schools were in a poor state of repair with little, if any contact with the wider community. One focus group of teachers highlighted how the principal appeared to be setting contradictory directions.

“The principal has said many times that he wants our school to be distinguished from other schools in terms of children’s performance not only in their results but also in their behavior, in how they carry themselves after school. Our focus has been on two different areas: firstly, on discipline and working with the discipline team and the counselling group to make sure that children know how to behave from an early age. In contrast, we are also focusing on raising academic outcomes. The focus set by the principal is on two very different priorities, but we are able to see the benefits of both in shaping fully rounded children.” (P16)

With so many areas to improve and so many issues to address, principals not only had to introduce a great deal of change and development quickly but also had to carefully sequence change through the integration of different approaches.

iii) Integrating of Approaches. The challenge for principals in schools in need of turnaround is exactly what to prioritize, in the face of so many challenges and competing demands. The evidence from this study suggests that principals carefully sequenced and coordinated their improvement efforts to best effect. The principals of the turnaround schools in Malaysia and Indonesia took great care in selecting their foci for improvement and ensuring that they were carefully coordinated.

“I try and ensure that all approaches to change and improvement are integrated, that they do not inflict a burden on teaching staff at the school. It is impossible to deal with competing priorities.” (P15)

The integration of strategies is explored in more depth in the next section of this working paper which looks at the foci for improvement.

iv) *Collaboration*. As well as working on their improvement approaches, the school principals in the study tried to build positive collaborative cultures in their schools. They did this in a variety of ways.

“I try to create a good working environment in the school, emphasizing team work. I have planned PLCs for teachers, so they can work together.” (P7)

“My strategies for improvement included the Performance Managing System, lesson observations and learning walks. Normally we only have the senior assistant and myself, but starting from next year I am going to teach teachers how to do this, so that they can assist me in monitoring the new teachers, I don't want to do it alone, so we will co-ordinate and do it together.” (P4)

Principals in this study talked at length about the importance of getting ‘buy in’ from teachers and parents. Many highlighted the importance of getting support from the community for their improvement efforts and gaining the trust of those within the school and outside it.

“To get trust from teachers and parents in my experience is simple, I started with, putting a general finance report of the school where anybody can see it. They know that I am transparent and support their side. Then, parents offer their help when schools have out of school activities and accompany teachers, because we built up confidence between them and us from beginning.” (P18)

Teachers were also encouraged to collaborate more with each other as a way of building community and as a means of raising attainment.

“For the English department we are a small group of five teachers for the whole school. We do not have centralized kind of program but we do work with each other. Our principal encouraged that. We now share our materials and resources. When one teacher is starting with a new topic, for example, if I am teaching English for year five for both classes then I do not need to discuss with anyone. but if I'm teaching year 2

and another teacher is also teaching year 2 for same subjects then we can share and pull our resources together that's how we work together.” (T12)

V) *Cultural Harmony*. All the principals in the study spoke, at some time, about a need to ensure that their actions fell within certain culturally accepted norms. These cultural features were particularly strongly represented in the data and strongly influenced the attitudes and actions of principals.

“After a year as leader of this school, we changed how we celebrate religious festival such as Eid Al-adha, our better students have a program to cook together with help of their parents and share the food with the school neighbourhood where some of them are poor. This really teaches them a lot about sacrifice and tolerance.” (P11) [Note: this school principal is a Catholic, where majority of students and parents are Muslim] “I came from West Java, but I am the principal in Yogyakarta. You know Javanese culture here is being polite, soft spoken and patient. So, I try to adopt that in my leadership practice. Mostly I urge the ideas should not come from me; we want the ideas to come from teachers and students, even parents, all are welcome.” (P14)

Many studies of school turnaround, particularly those from a Western perspective, tend to foreground the centrality of strategies or solutions for success. Their findings tend to focus on the instrumental means to improvement, rarely considering how cultural factors affect the leadership practices of those involved in improvement (Meyers & Darwin, 2017). In contrast, the findings from this research project point towards very clear cultural expectations, placed upon the principal that acutely determined how the process of turnaround took place.

While school leadership in both contexts was accepted as hierarchical and top-down in orientation, in practice, the leadership exhibited in the schools was not dictatorial but inclusive and collegial. Principals were described as humble, quiet and were described as *serving* the school and its community. The social and religious context in which these principals worked profoundly affected how they viewed themselves and their work. They described a deeply held set of values that were linked to their faith and profoundly shaped their leadership practice. Their leadership was guided by a

strong moral purpose and a deep sense of being responsible to the children and the parents.

Research studies reinforce how leadership, within certain Asian settings, is strongly defined by a belief system and dominated by strongly held values (Dorfman, Howell, Hibino, Lee, Tate, & Bautista, 1997; Harris *et al.*, 2017; Bryant, Walker, & Haiyan, 2017; Hallinger & Walker, 2017). It was clear from this study that principals in viewed themselves chiefly as moral leaders, as role models to follow, as the builders of community, rather than as the drivers or instigators of change. While principals were clear about their foci for improvement and the reasons for the school turnaround, they spoke about their achievements in a humble way, praising students, staff and community members for their contribution to the school's success.

b) Foci for Improvement

Many low-performing schools are caught up in a perfect storm of problems accompanied by a range of imperfect solutions. Although schools in high poverty contexts, such as those in this study, tend to share certain socio-economic challenges, sometimes this is where the similarity ends. The study found that there were common responses to the process of change even though the nature of the turnaround trajectory at each school was very different.

The data from Malaysia and Indonesia was analysed in terms of the frequency of responses regarding the improvement approaches or strategies (Appendix 1 and 2). The data revealed that in each setting there were ten key foci for change and improvement that principals and teachers repeatedly mentioned. Chart 1 shows the ten foci for improvement highlighted in the Malaysian data. The emphasis on school self-evaluation and instruction reflect the requirements on school principals in Malaysia to regularly monitor, assess and evaluate teaching and learning practices in the school (Harris *et al.*, 2017). The TALIS data (2016) reinforced that Malaysia was one of the countries investing heavily in teacher collaboration, within and across schools. As noted earlier, engaging parents was a pressing concern and priority for principals, in both contexts and therefore it appears as one of their main areas for improvement.

Chart 1

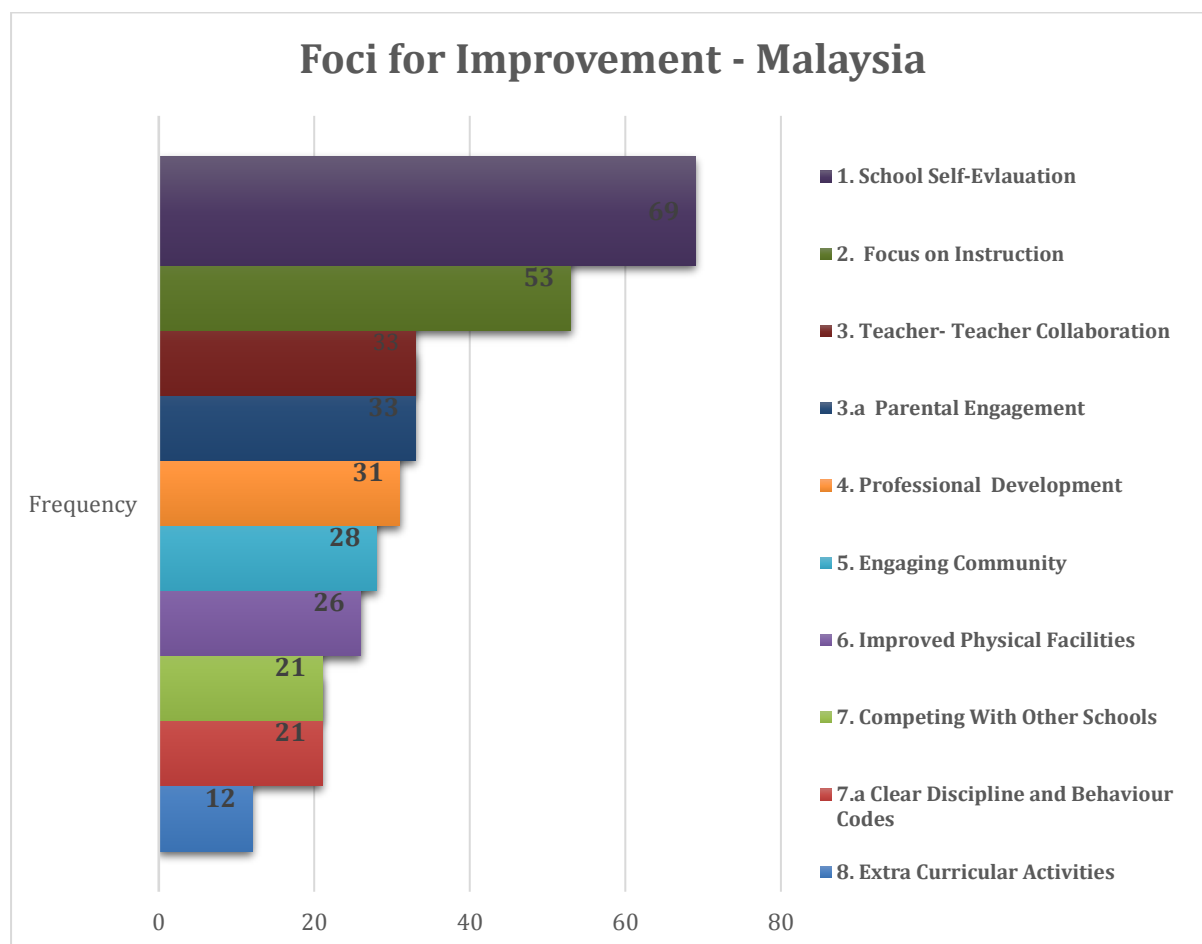


Chart 2 presents a summary of the data from principals and teachers in the Indonesian schools. In contrast, parental engagement is the top strategy for improvement within this context with school self-evaluation following as the second main priority for change and improvement. The improvement approaches deployed by Indonesian principals and Malaysian principals were very similar and it was clear that all principals invested a great deal of time in working within and with community partners and key stakeholders.

Chart 2

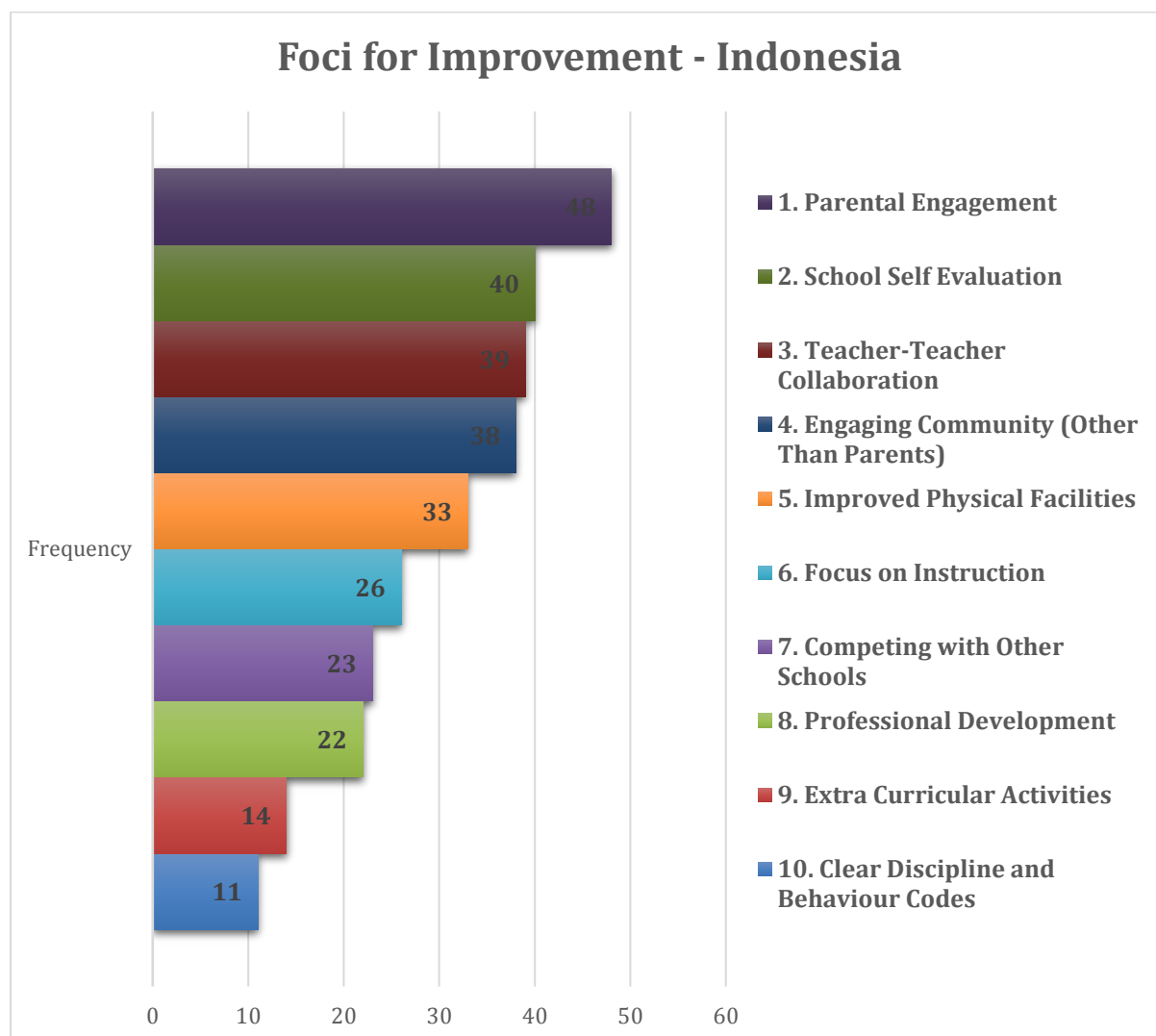
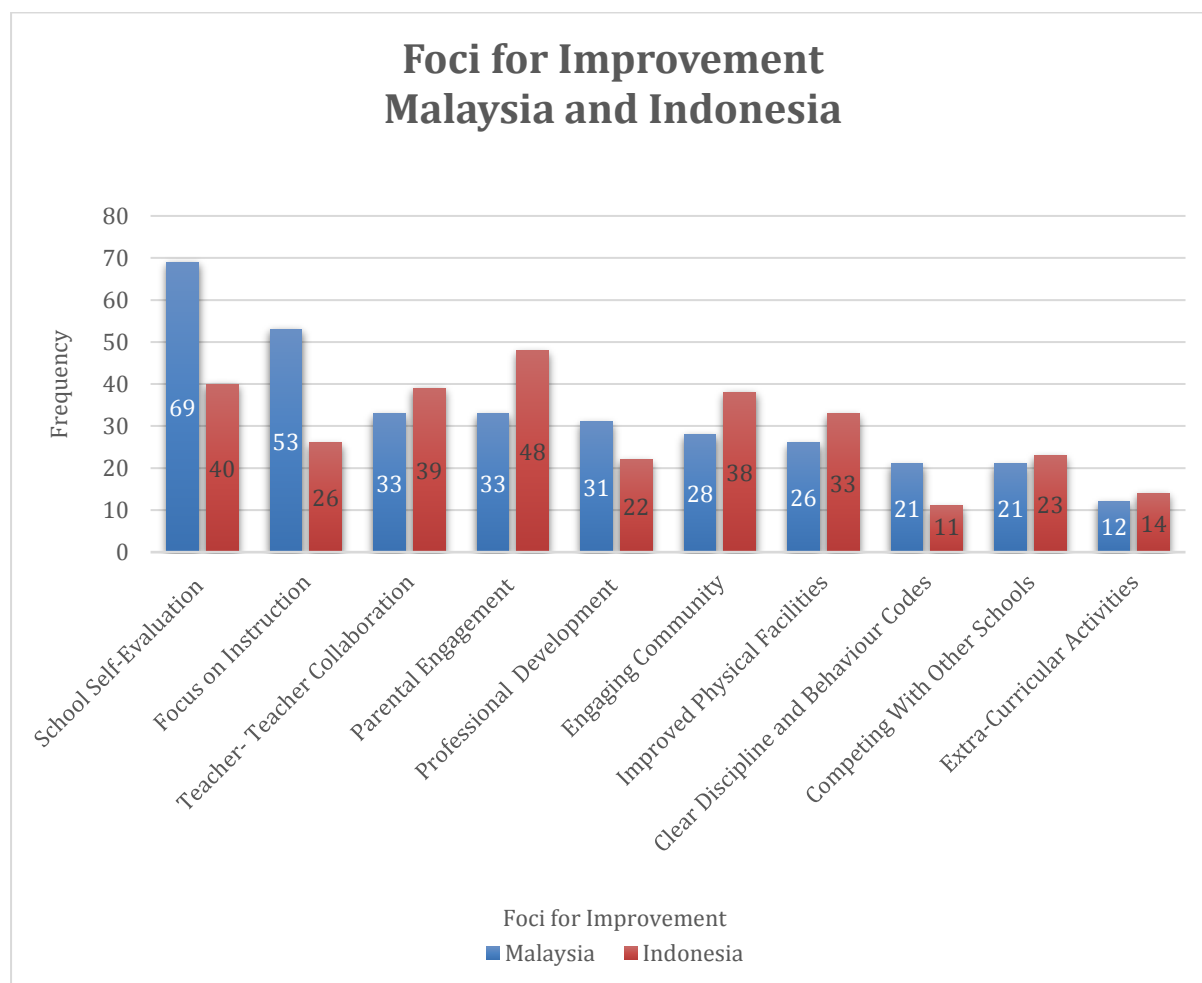


Chart 3 provides a comparison between Malaysia and Indonesia, based on the data. This shows that the approaches to improvement, identified by principals and teachers, were consistent across the sample of schools in the study even though the strength of representation in the data differed.

Chart 3



From these charts, ‘a focus on instruction’ was identified as a dominant approach to improvement in the schools in the study and this included changes to assessments, pedagogy and the curriculum. Evidence from international studies reinforce the importance of instructional leadership and improving instructional practices, if school improvement is to be secured and sustained (Hallinger & Walker 2017; Harris *et al.*, 2017).

Commentary

This small-scale study aimed to identify the features or factors that directly contribute to the embedding and sustaining of transformation of low-performing schools in Malaysia and Indonesia. It also afforded a comparative view of the way in which school leaders approach the process of transformation in two very different contexts. Some reflections and observations from this study will now be outlined.

Firstly, the study found that definitions of ‘turnaround schools’, used in the international school improvement literature, did not readily apply within the Malaysia or Indonesian school settings. In Malaysia, the term ‘school turnaround’ was not widely recognized, or indeed accepted by many principals, as the term was associated with negative or critical connotations. In Indonesia, so many of the schools, in that region, could be categorized as low-performing that the idea of ‘turnaround schools’ was a relatively meaningless concept. There were schools in areas of disadvantage that could be identified as improving but they were not called ‘turnaround schools’.

Secondly, in Malaysia the interventions aimed at improving low-performing schools tended to incorporate, greater assistance, additional resource and new teaching and learning interventions. There is some ongoing evaluative evidence that charts the progress of these interventions in Malaysian schools, particularly in the Trust schools and in the GUSTO project. In direct contrast, accounts of improving low-performing schools in Indonesia tended to be much more localized and community based. Unlike Malaysia, there is not a central drive aimed at improving low-performing schools. There are Municipal plans and a local focus on supporting such schools, but a nationally coordinated approach has yet to be established.

Thirdly, in Malaysia, specific district level training was targeted at principals and teachers in low-performing schools with a strong emphasis on instructional leadership, peer to peer collaboration and improving pedagogy. In contrast, for the low-performing Indonesian schools, there was little coordinated external guidance or support for the process of turnaround or change. Improvement efforts, therefore, largely stemmed from the principal, Municipal advisors and key stakeholders.

On balance, the study found that the process of turning around low-performing schools in Indonesia is less systematic, less centralized, and more politically fragile than in Malaysia. Where it does exist, authentic school turnaround in Indonesia is more sporadic, community generated and locally owned. Conversely, in Malaysia, principals and teachers tended to talk far more about the national expectations placed upon them, through the Malaysian Education Blueprint, to secure better student outcomes (Harris *et al.*, 2017). The findings from this study raise some important questions about the prospect of large-scale improvement and school turnaround, in both countries.

This exploratory study has highlighted how ‘turnaround is at best difficult work’ (Meyers & Darwin, 2017:3) and reinforces that particularly in both these settings a contextually appropriate and culturally responsive form of leadership practice is required to be most successful (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). The study has also underlined the importance of context and the need to view any turnaround process from a national and local vantage point (Harris & Jones, 2015). While the foci for improvement in Malaysia and Indonesia were not too dissimilar from those identified in the international literature (Meyers & Darwin, 2017) the contexts in which this process of improvement was enacted and realized was dramatically different.

In contrast to the turnaround process routinely and consistently documented in the Western literature, particularly in the USA and the UK, the turnaround processes in Malaysia and Indonesia signal some important contextual differences. Firstly, levels of investment in school turnaround are significantly lower in Malaysia and Indonesia than in developed countries like the USA or UK. For example, in the USA over 7 billion dollars has been spent on turning around low-performing schools through a dedicated Federal programme of intervention⁷

Secondly, as developing countries, the impact of poverty and disadvantage in Malaysia and Indonesia is acute, pervasive and on a scale, that makes improving low-performing schools a major challenge. An OECD report (2015) noted that within the

⁷ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/es_20170209_loeb_evidence_speaks.pdf

Indonesian education system, large disparities exist in student access, educational equality, and teacher certification particularly in schools in remote and poor areas. The report also notes that teacher absenteeism is the highest in schools where student absenteeism is also at a high level. These schools are normally located in poor, remote and disadvantaged areas. Therefore, the main challenge for both Malaysia and Indonesia, is one of securing improvement in schools that are facing a wide range of poverty related issues or problems.

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Finally, the findings from this study suggest that an exploration of cultural influences on leadership practice deserves further scrutiny and exploration, particularly in Asian contexts. As noted earlier, the literature on leadership, school effectiveness and school improvement in Asia remains relatively under-developed (Bryant *et al.*, 2017; Harris, 2015). The emerging evidence on culturally responsive leadership highlights how effective school leaders show a determination to create a welcoming environment for all students and their parents (Khalifa *et al.*, 2016). The literature also suggests that the practice of culturally responsive leadership is heavily dependent upon the geographic or cultural setting of the school (Bryant et al, 2017). The evidence from this study reinforces that most effective school leaders ‘demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work’ (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008:3)

Two central conclusions can be drawn from this research study. Firstly, that the principals of the schools in Malaysia and Indonesia, chose areas for improvement that were contextually and culturally appropriate. Secondly, while no set of improvement strategies or remedies work in every school setting, there were a consistent set of approaches that the principals deployed to generate change and improvement in their schools. The evidence showed that these improvement approaches emanated from two sources: directly from the circumstances they faced i.e. low parental engagement or from their responsibilities as set out by the Ministry, District, or Municipality i.e. school self-evaluation.

Clearly, more research is needed to explore school improvement processes and practices, within Malaysian and Indonesian schools. This requires much wider and deeper empirical investigation. The findings from this current study, however, offers insights to inform future empirical studies and provides evidence that will contribute to the growing knowledge base on school improvement and system transformation in Asia.

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Appendix 1

Foci for Improvement- Malaysia

Focus	Frequency
1. School Self-Evaluation	69
2. Focus on Instruction	53
3. Parental Engagement	33
3.a Teacher- Teacher Collaboration	33
4. Professional Development	31
5. Engaging Community	28
6. Improved Physical Facilities	26
7. Clear Discipline and Behaviour Codes	21
7.a Competing With Other Schools	21
8. Extra-Curricular Activities	12

Appendix 2

Foci for Improvement- Indonesia

Focus	Frequency
1. Parental Engagement	48
2. School Self Evaluation	40
3. Teacher-Teacher Collaboration	39
4. Engaging Community (Other Than Parents)	38
5. Improved Physical Facilities	33
6. Focus on Instruction	26
7. Competing with Other Schools	23
8. Professional Development	22
9. Extra-Curricular Activities	14
10. Clear Discipline and Behaviour Codes	11